

Ankur Mutreja

Kerala Hugged

Munnar/Kochi/Alleppey/Varkala

Not to be sold on Amazon

KERALA HUGGED

Munnar/Kochi/Alleppey/Varkala

-Ankur Mutreja

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Editorial Review

Completed on: 12/09/2016 (9th December, 2016)

Review Rating: 5 stars!

Reviewed By Mamta Madhavan for **Readers' Favorite**

Kerala Hugged: Munnar/Kochi/Alleppey/Varkala by Ankur Mutreja is a travelogue that takes readers on an interesting trip to Kochi, Alleppey, Munnar, and Varkala in Kerala along with the author and lets them discover the natural beauty of this place, which lies at the southernmost tip of India. The book captures the sights and sounds of each location, the places of interest there, and the author's memories as a tourist that made the trip memorable. The author's description of the places and his memories will make any reader want to pack their bags, take a trip to Kerala, and experience the abundance of natural beauty that has given it the title 'God's Own Country.'

The author speaks about the places in detail, and the color pictures shared in the book make his descriptions vivid and real and help readers connect well with the places and his words. Be it the hills of Munnar, the houseboat and backwater experience at Alleppey, the beaches of Varkala, or the crowded lanes of Fort Kochi, and the other tourist attractions, the author speaks about the diversity of the place extensively. For all those planning a trip to Kerala, this book is perfect as it will help them in deciding what to see, which places to visit, and what to expect while traveling in Kerala.

I enjoyed the book immensely as it is honest, and the author's writing style is simple and neat, making it easy for readers to understand. On the whole the book is an excellent travelogue and it brings alive the beauty of the places effectively.

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(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

About the Author



Ankur Mutreja is a writer by choice, which choice he exercises best while writing on travel. Though he has been writing on travel in piecemeal manner, this book is his first travelogue. He has also been writing on other varied topics for last more than a decade through his blogs, which are accessible from his website. In 2015, he converted his blogs into a book entitled "[Writings @ Ankur Mutreja](#)" and derived three other titles from it: "[Sparks: Satire and Reviews](#)", "[Flare: Opinions \(Law, Human Rights and Politics\)](#)", and "[Light: Philosophy](#)". He has also published a short book of poems entitled "[Nine Poems](#)" in the same year. His main areas of interest in the writing arena are Travel, Reviews, Satire, Poems, Opinions and Philosophy. Of course, other than these, he does lots of legal writing too.

Other than writing and travel, Ankur likes books, music, news, internet, and jogging, and recently he has rekindled his love for biking. Ankur doesn't open up easily, but on peeling a few difficult layers, he may turn out to be a sweet, soft pulp -- it depends entirely on you; he just reflects. Try your luck at:

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Prologue

In a borderless world, all would be travelers indeed. India is a small borderless world in itself, and Kerala lies at the southernmost tip. I live almost near the lovely Kashmir, but does that make Kerala any less lovely! This book is indeed my baby born out of my love of nature.

Writing books is the closest men ever came to having children.

--Norman Mailer

Kerala is beautiful not only because of "God" but also because of the people who have made Kerala their home. I went there as a parasite in the disguise of a tourist and sucked all I could in a short span of 23 days. But did anybody ever complain? No, never. I think they believe the joy multiplies by sharing, and hereby I emulate them.

It started reluctantly in the midst of court appearances in Delhi courts in a busy September. Don't know how and when I boarded the Kerala Express, which left me in Kochi to enliven my life forever. Kochi is the place to discover yourself, your life and the world beautiful around you. How? Discover inside.

I, having been discovered, headed to Alleppey. Not to relax in the luxury of backwaters but to learn how they keep it so beautiful. Of course, I had to merge into them to discover their world. Snake boat races epitomize the best of their lives, so very different from that of ours own. You can learn it only if you become part of it. I did try my luck. Did I succeed? Discover inside.

Can you fall in love at 40? Yes for sure if you are in Munnar. The one I fell in love with was very special. Who was she? Was she a sexy Keralan? a pretty French? a bold German? a speedy American? a frank Britisher? a thinking Russian? a cute Chinese? a shy Pakistani? or, all of them merged into one? What happened to our love story? Do we meet even now? Or were there heart breaks? Discover inside.

Who says it is necessary to work to live? Definitely not if you are in Varkala! You can relax, think, observe, do no work, yet live a life. And it's so very simple! The nature itself helps you in it. How exactly? Well...discover inside.

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Munnar: Love

Love at First Sight

Generally, wherever I travel, I enquire about the property prices. I didn't do it in Munnar, and how much I regret it! Who knows I might be having the wherewithal to own a little part of that heaven called Munnar. Unfortunately, for that little mistake, I will have to just admire that beauty, not own it. On second thoughts, nobody has ever owned that beauty: Britishers, Tata or tourists like me. The tea planters, the tea workers, the tea exporters, *et al*, have all merged into a cohesive one and are protecting and enhancing the beauty with sincere admiration. And what a job they have done! Munnar is the beauty incarnated, and she was indeed playful:

I hardly started to admire her that she draped herself in clouds.

Playful she was, but shy she wasn't.

Announcing love, the clouds receded, and she smiled in jest.

Alas! I only gazed her. Too pretty to be near! Too alluring to be far!



Munnar sight seeing is guided by various viewpoints; Lockhart Gap Viewpoint, Top Station Viewpoint, Photo Point, Echo Point, Shooting Point, Pothamedu Viewpoint, etc., but these are helpful only for those who are blinded

to beauty. In Munnar, wherever you stand is a viewpoint. If you are lucky, you book your hotel away from the town in the laps of the beauty; i.e, Chinnakanal, Devikulam, Suryanelli, Poopada, Yellapetty, Anachal, Pothamedu, etc. If you are luckier, you hire a bike for sight seeing and mark your viewpoints on the way. And if you are the luckiest, you also take your bike to far flung places like Thekkady, Wayanad, Ooty, Kodaikanal, etc.

(Well...I fall in the last category; yes, the luckiest! I booked my hotel in Suryanelli, 22 km away from the town in the midst of tea gardens. I rented a bike and was able to convince them to let me ride the bike not only in and around Munnar but also to Thekkady and back.)

Though the viewpoints were more or less superfluous, but the distances weren't. Top Station Viewpoint, as the name suggest, is located at a great height and is so to help people get the best view of the hills. But what interested me the most was the downhill slope from Top Station to Kundala Dam. The road was surrounded by tea gardens on both sides, and a very pleasant breeze flew all throughout without differentiating between the beautiful gardens and the ugly petrol/diesel vehicles. Luckily for me, my bike had touched reserve, and I decided to ride the slope with the breeze sans petrol, and what an experience it was. It felt as if it was not a ride but a flight in the laps of the nature, with a little cuddle here and a little cuddle there in between the delicate tosses from one lap to another. You can experience this anywhere and everywhere in Munnar with a little sensitivity, and which I indeed did throughout my stay in Munnar.

Just a caveat: don't try it at night because not just you but your bike also enjoys these cuddles and turns its eyes off sans petrol, which, instead of tossing between laps, can actually bump you off the road, and that can indeed be very risky on hills -- it did happen to me; I jumped off the bike; only miraculously she halted in screech, and how I ashamed I felt on abandoning her, with whom I would soon fall in love.



Other than viewpoints, Munnar has waterfalls: Chinnakanal, Lakkam, Attukal, Nyayamakad, Kuthumkal, Cheeyappara, Valara, Thoovanam, etc. Chinnakanal waterfalls was my next door neighbor, and I fell so much in love with her that I didn't look any further; so, I don't really know who is the prettiest. Of course, you can checkout all of them, or, like me, shower all your love on just one. Either way you stay happy as they love us all irrespective of age, sex, caste, creed, color or race.



There are at least three dams in and around Munnar with adjoining lakes; Mattupetty, Kundala, and Anayirangal; I visited all of them but couldn't boat in any. Mettupatty only had speed boats, which were available for couples and

families only – I tried arguing I am dating Munnar, but those money-minded _____ didn't understand it. At Kundala, the two boats were so much in love with each other, I just couldn't disturb them. And, at Anayirangal, the rains scared my wits, and I drove my bike right into the lake, more or less, and of course this is no way to make love.



However, the place where I did make love was Blossom Park. It is a nice park with flowers, rocks, water bodies, etc, but the thing which attracted me the most was the fish SPA. It is not just one but many fishes, who kiss, cuddle and tickle you (and sometimes even bite you) till you start blushing red. And if you are lucky, you may also get some very good company from your own species, ready to bare it all for you. The name of the fish was Garrarufa, and the damage: 200 bucks for 15 minutes; the only time I have paid for love.

Enough of love! Now time for some knowledge at Tea Museum. Tea is grown at a height of 3000-3750 ft at a slope of 30-45%. It doesn't compete with any other produce; therefore, the Indian rulers of that time gave apparent uncultivable land to the Britishers, on which they set up tea plantation by 1880. They employed migrant Tamilian men as laborers and their wives as tea pluckers. Till they rode their first bike in 1909, they had been using rail road, which, but for the floods of 1924, would have been in use even now. Nevertheless, they also built a ropeway connecting Munnar to Top Station. They

introduced maternity and health benefits much before the legislation demanded them to do it, and after independence, the Indian managers took over. In 1976, Tata bought over the British company Finlay, and, in 1983, changed the name to Tata Tea. As the fate would have it, even Tata exited in 2005 handing over the control to the employees, who renamed the company as Kannan Devan Hills Plantation Co. Pvt. Ltd. It is now the largest participatory management company in India with more than 12,500 employees as shareholders. All the above from the exhibits at the Museum and the documentary I saw therein, which the majority left in the middle.



The rest below from my first hand experience of the tea manufacturing process in the factory replica created in the museum complex. The tea leaves plucked by beautiful hands are sorted and run through a series of cutters turning them into small granules, which are then oxidized in an oxidation chamber and discharged into the drying chamber at 104 degree centigrade after a wait of 40 minutes. Then the finest granules are collected in big bags in a tedious process, are separated into various categories, are packed, and are then sold in the market, including the one existing just next to the shop floor selling everything two for the price of one. And if you are still not asleep, have a nice sip at the vending machine. Enjoy your tea! After that we will go on a long drive.

Dating the Gorgeous

By then, I had already fallen in love with the bike too. When I went to return her, I made all excuses but the truth that I have fallen in love – had I disclosed it, probably, it would have been easier. They were very protective about her. They wanted to protect her from the prying eyes of the police, wild animals, unscrupulous mechanics, *et al.* I assured them of my capability to protect her from the world. In fact, I always carry my fitness certificates along, which I promptly presented to them in drills comprising 100 push-ups, 100 pull-ups, 200 sit-ups, and a 21 km half marathon. So assured, they finally allowed me to take her into the jungles of Periyar Tiger Reserve, Thekkady. Actually, their concerns were not unfounded. The business works with the help and connivance of the police, and they had no access to the police in Thekkady, which was a different police station. Moreover, Thekkady is next to Tamil Nadu, where lechery/corruption is more widespread.

The trip started on the known paths, for I have been tracking 20 km of it everyday in my trip to and fro to my hotel. There were 90 km more of it, out of which 15 km till Poopada were dreamlike. I was residing so near to this unexplored part of heaven and didn't even know about it. These 15 km were mostly downhill, which I covered in no less than 2 hrs because I had already learned the art of getting tossed around in the laps of nature, and there was no way I was going to miss this opportunity. Indeed, I switched off the engine and let the hill breeze guide the navigation of my bike. In Kerala, cows are killed for food; so, they have turned rebels. They deliberately cross the roads in front of the speeding vehicles bringing the vehicles to a screeching halt. However, if you ride the slope sans petrol, they don't interfere, for they recognize your love for the Mother Nature and don't feel threatened. Their confidence is not misplaced, for they are well recognized mothers themselves. *Gau Rakshaks*: there are better ways of loving mother than killing people.



The exciting ride started after Poopada. It suddenly started pouring heavily, very heavily. There was no way I could have stopped after having taken almost 4 hrs in covering a short distance till Poopada -- had I stopped then, I would have never reached Thekkady. So, I drove in the rains on the hills. The road was slippery to say the least, and I had to ride at the speed of around 40 km/hr to reach Thekkady in next two hours before it was night. In addition to that, I didn't even have a proper helmet with a face protection, and the rain wouldn't stop for a minute for the next two hours. I came to a conclusion that this was the punishment of "God" for flirting too much with its own property Kerala ("God's own country"). I had no option but to trust my beloved bike, who I must say didn't betray my trust. Steep hills, slippery roads, unexpected bumps, dark turns, narrow escapes, and muddy encounters: she did it all, in the rain, without complaining even once; that's what you call a good partner. I had almost started feeling guilty for not being a good protector, but if the love is mutual, you hardly need to protect. For record, I passed through Devikulam, Poopada, Nedumkandam, and Kumily on my way to Thekkady, and this is the most scenic route possible.

Yes, the police did try to play spoilsport. They stopped me and my bike on a false accusation that I had no license. Basically, they were acting moral police, trying to separate two love birds on false notions of societal norms. But I am also

a lawyer. I gave them a lecture on criminal law, family law and uniform civil code. It seems it was the last challenge of the "God", but he doesn't know he also has to go to courts to get his property rights invoked. Indeed, I and my bike together beat the "God".



The Villain

Let me say at the outset, this portion is going to be unsightly. I completely failed to nail the tiger. Leaving aside the tiger, I didn't spot any wild cat of any denomination in the tiger reserve. I agree I didn't go for the tiger trail program, but I did go for bamboo rafting and was expecting to spot at least some wild animals. The program was expensive at 2000 bucks, for it was very badly conducted by an incompetent guide. Adding to that the racial discrimination; I had one of the worst experiences. I have decided not to share the racial discrimination experience, but I would definitely advice you not to participate in any of the heavily marketed programs conducted by Periyar Tiger Reserve. Just go for the nature walk or the boat ride and don't spend more than half a day in the reserve unless you have some insider information on how to experience wildlife in Periyar at Thekkady. I have heard good reviews about jeep safari at GAVI, which is nearly 40 km from Thekkady, costing nearly the same as

bamboo rafting, but, unfortunately, I chose bamboo rafting; so, I can't illuminate you on GAVI.



I did send a terse feedback-cum-complaint to the Field Director, (Project Tiger), on his email id, with the threat of going public on no response. Nobody has responded; so, the email is reproduced below:

This is to bring it to your kind attention that your program Bamboo Rafting (Full Day) at Periyar Tiger Reserve is being conducted by a very incompetent guide, who identified himself as Pandian (Photograph attached). I attended this program today, i.e. 22.09.16, in a group comprising 13 people, and I am sorry to say my experience was very bad. It felt as if I have been cheated of my money. The guide would talk to only a few people in the front and was almost inaudible at the end of the queue. He was not carrying any binoculars and actually borrowed a zoom camera from one of the guests to locate and identify a wild animal, which incidentally he couldn't. He would concentrate more on identifying and explaining flora than fauna. In fact, in the whole trip lasting about 8 hrs, we spotted only a herd of elephants, that too without any efforts on the part of the guide. Even while spotting the elephants, he acted in such a haphazard manner that the elephants started getting agitated even when we were almost a KM away from them, and we had to leave the spot at once. His knowledge of English is very poor, and often a great effort had to be made to understand what he was trying to say. He didn't even give a brief explanation of the park like the area, the

fauna types, the geography, etc. He didn't explain anything with the help of a map as to how much distance was traversed in what all directions, and what were the chances of spotting a tiger on the path we traversed. He said he has been in the business for last twenty years, but his incompetence belied his experience -- an ass doesn't become a horse just because he has been running in a race course for twenty years. I am extremely dissatisfied with the whole experience. I call upon you to immediately terminate the services of this guide and inform me of the same within next fifteen days in reply to this email, failing which this issue will be raised in the media and/or the judiciary.

Farewell and Longing

I was so disappointed with Periyar and longing so very badly for Munnar that I left Thekkady the next day early morning even though I had come to experience Thekkady for two days at least. The return journey was fast and uneventful: I covered 110 km in 3 hrs, and no agent of "God" dared disturb my speed. It seemed as if the bike was more eager to reach Munnar. This was one perfect group, where both of us loved Munnar without any jealousy, whatsoever.

Once I reached Munnar, I tried filling up for Periyar by visiting Eravikulam National Park. Of course, there were no wild animals there, but there was a lovely goat-alike called Nilgiri Tahr. She would pose like a pro for the shutterbugs and was pretty photogenic too. But try clicking a selfie, and the star would give you a tight kick on the bum. This star definitely knew her value, and so did the management of the park. They would not allow any private vehicle inside the park, and the minibuses they ran for the guests were forever occupied. The first time I visited the park, there was a waiting queue of 3 hrs to board the bus. Then I learned there was also a possibility of getting an advanced reservation done to meet the reclusive star. Of course, I paid up and fixed an advance appointment, and it was worth the efforts. This was the prettiest star I have seen in the flesh.



Indeed, I did find some of my solace back in that ever beautiful Munnar, but it was time to leave. Even Munnar didn't want me to leave; therefore, she sent the designated bus to Ernakulam an hour too early (or, blind in love, I noted the time wrong), and there was also the farewell with the bike. In any case, I missed my bus, which gave me another hour with Munnar, but I had to leave after all. Yes, I do meet her in dreams, but the love affair came to an end. Did it rain? I think it did!

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Kochi: Enliven

Fort Kochi

I started my Kerala trip from Fort Kochi, and had I not accidentally read about the snake boat races while generally surfing the Internet, I might have stayed there forever. So, it is extremely important to surf internet in Fort Kochi. That's the only way to keep in touch with the real world in a fantasy world where pleasure appears faster than time, and you are left with no choice but to extend time, forever. The place is magical without any trace of trickery. No body cheats; all speak politely; the narrow streets have no stain of dirt; the home made chocolates exude pleasant smell; the beach breeze compliments jogging; the Kathakali centers induce musical evenings; the books invite a reading; the spice market opens up nostrils; the Basilica challenges atheism; the museums enhance knowledge. Oh! So this was witchery to make me lose grip on reality. No, you need to surf internet incessantly in Fort Kochi.

Though the gifts were many, but I will have to specially thank Fort Kochi for gifting me a morning rhythm. I like jogging, but thanks to the pollution in Delhi, I have almost stopped it. But the morning breeze at Fort Kochi Beach naturally helps you shed lethargy. All you have to do is just wake up and smell the beach; the rest will be taken care of by the nature itself. I jogged in Fort Kochi on each of the eight mornings I spent there, and that helped me get into the morning rhythm, which continued throughout my stay in Kerala. There was lots of Indian Navy presence in the area in and around Beach Road: the Southern Naval Command of Indian Navy is situated in Kochi. The young cadets also jogged every morning at Beach Road. Jogging alongside the young cadets did make me believe myself younger, and the euphoria continues. Was that just the magic of the place? Or, have I really become younger? I chose to live with the second.

Backwater Cruise: Vaikom

Generally, people prefer backwater cruising in a houseboat at either Alleppey, Kumarakom, or Kollam, but I luxuriated in Vaikom, albeit unintentionally. Traveling alone, I had no attraction for houseboats, and given this cruise was planned in a *Shikara* along with a country boat, I decided to take it up as a study tour. It's only accidental that it turned into a luxury. I undertook this cruise along with backpackers, who, unlike me, had come in pairs and knew pretty much everything about life; so, obviously they were in no mood to learn. The day started with cold vibes until Surya (name changed to protect privacy), the guide, introduced us to the intriguing world of backwaters. I discovered I can be as enthusiastic as a child even at forty (almost). While others captured nature in their cameras, I bombarded Surya with questions a plenty: do children from the backwater villages go to school; how many people live in each of the villages; whom do they marry; do they vote; who built that big house. Surya, a well-experienced and a well-qualified English speaking graduate, answered them all – but as would soon appear, the answers became unimportant.

In the second part of the cruise, there was a choice of either the same boat, i.e. *Shikara*, or a smaller country boat. Except for me, everybody wanted to keep the *Shikara*, but I wanted to play my enthusiasm further in the narrow lanes of the backwaters. Thankfully, for a change, I didn't rebel, and the *Shikara* cruised leisurely along the shore giving an opportunity to the silence to take over the noise. Bored by the silence and betrayed by the colonizers (yes, that's precisely what came to mind), I covered my reality with a dream, courtesy the eye-mask and the ear phones. But in the dream as well, the smiling Surya arrived ready to answer all my questions, but I had questions no more. I don't know what protest I lodged but suddenly the afternoon breeze took over the enthusiasm of the morning: the eye-mask fell, the sunglasses substituted, and the dream continued in the mellifluous voice of Lata Mangeshkar: *Paani Paani Re...* Reality can't be so beautiful! It must have been a dream only.



Kerala History Museum

Museums are a plenty in Kochi. Most of them are situated in and around Fort Kochi. However, the one I am interested in discussing is the Kerala History Museum located in Edapally, Kochi. The location *per se* is not very convenient for tourists; therefore, the museum deserves a little bias in its favor, for it is susceptible to neglect (call it affirmative action, if you wish). Actually, it is not just a history museum but a history and art complex comprising a history museum, a doll museum, a centre for visual arts, a gallery of miniatures, and a gallery of painting and sculptures. The ambience of the place is very relaxed, and the officers-on-duty, very co-operative.

The history museum, unlike the norm, is a guided audio tour running from the pre-history era to the post-independence communist rule. The tour duration is about half an hour, and I think they wouldn't mind if you attend the tour more than once, especially if the tour is hosted by that smiling lady who also doubles up as the sales agent in the publications section. In any case, the tour can be complimented with a history booklet available for purchase in the publications section for a price. The booklet lists out all the exhibits with pictures and description verbatim to the one presented in the tour. I think one should definitely buy the booklet, for the books, whatsoever, are never too expensive.

I reached the place very late with only an hour and a half to my disposal in the complex; therefore, I didn't experience the visual arts and didn't pay much attention to the doll museum and the gallery of miniatures -- I would recommend anybody visiting the complex to at least reserve half a day for the complex. Nevertheless, I experienced the gallery of paintings, and that too all alone – the attendant had some emergency so she left before the closing time, and the delegate, a Bihari boy, bestowed complete trust in me, which I betrayed by clicking photographs inside the museum in spite of a clear instruction against it; nevertheless, I informed him of my misdemeanor, at which he asked the name of my home state, and, on divulgence, he informed me that Bombay is better than Delhi and Kochi is the best, for which I will have to trust him tit-for-tat.

Let me say the experience in the gallery was incomparable. I am no art connoisseur, but I can stand spell bound when I see a beauty, and I just couldn't move in the gallery at few places – had I not taken those photographs, I would have been sculpted then and there; so, the little misdemeanor was necessary. The curator has chosen the paintings with a great taste: paintings have been selected from the Progressive Artists Group (M. F. Hussain, S. Chauda, Kishen Khanna, *et al*), the Matured Bengal School (Abanindranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose, Gemini Roy, Somnath Hore, *et al*), the Company School (Ravi Varma, Rama Verma, *et al*), Abstract Art (Ramkumar, Manu Parekh, G. R. Santosh, Kaladharan, *et al*), etc.

Everyone is acquainted with the name M. F. Hussain, but not many may know that he chose a radical mode of art that negated the accepted ideas of beauty, the rules of art and the elite taste, and that became evident when his painting was juxtaposed with the one by Ravi Verma, whose was a realist mode of painting influenced by the needs of the East India Company, who wanted to capture the reality of India on canvas. But, standing there, it is difficult to choose one over another, especially for a person like me who has no personal preference and is vulnerable to beauty in whichever form it exists. The Matured Bengal School itself had many variations: Abanindranath Tagore's Chinese and Japanese

style; Jamini Roy's native folk style; Humanist artists like Chithoprasad Jain depicting human beings and their sufferings; and Calcutta group depicting humanism albeit with universalism accepting the western influence in art form.

I wish I could share the pictures, but that Bihari boy has made me guilt conscious. However, I hope I have generated enough material for you to imagine and enjoy your own paintings designed in your own minds, for the life *per se* is a painting, and you can indeed design it yourself with your own Free Will.

Scooter Ride on Kochi Roads

I don't ride scooters/bikes any more, but I did ride them a lot in the teenage. In fact, I had a strong urge to ride bikes. But as the fate would have it, I couldn't serenade in the din of traffic engineering lectures (Town Planning), financial management intrigues (MBA) and court room briefings (LL.B.).

Fort Kochi has lots of bike rental agencies. I rented a scooter and went for a ride in the streets of Kochi sans license -- the bike rental agencies at Fort Kochi deposit your driving license. The ride in Kochi *per se* was pretty ordinary. The arterials were as crowded as they are in any other metropolis: the roads were broken at places; there were road deviations as well; the signage were missing; people were crossing roads at will; and the vehicles were blowing horns a lot.

However, before hitting Kochi proper, I scooted on a highway from Bolgatty Island to Ernakulam. The ride on the highway was very, very smooth. There were lots of LMVs on the road but not many HCVs, which made the ride even smoother. I covered the distance of around 10 km in less than 10 mins. There were hardly any road breaks, and I don't remember crossing any traffic signals either. In fact, I was so overwhelmed that I ended up overfilling the petrol tank on the way.

But once I reached the city, the traffic took over the speed, and I couldn't ride smooth any longer. I returned the scooter next day with overfilled tank with the hope that the next rider would ride the scooter on highways, not streets. But,

of course, the rental agencies remove excess petrol before renting out the vehicles. If there were any way to mark my petrol, I would have marked it for highways only, and if all were to do similarly, bicycle would become the mode of choice on city streets. Any innovator reading this book: please find some way to mark the petrol for highways only.

Kalaripayattu

Kalaripayattu is the martial arts form of Kerala, which in its extreme form is said to be the genesis of Kung Fu. It was practiced by the warriors, who were indeed very busy in Kerala given its history of acquisitions and forced surrenders. Nevertheless, now it has been relegated to a less preferred art, which becomes apparent from the fact that the shows are organized along with Kathakali in the same compound, and the PROs are always interested in selling Kathakali over Kalaripayattu. I, however, chose it over Kathakali and was indeed in a clear minority, before, during, and after the show. In fact, I was the only audience in the show featuring three artists/warriors. But the artists didn't show any disinterest and presented their skills as if they were entertaining the Madison Square audience, albeit sans the 56" chest.

Kalaripayattu has three forms, and the one I witnessed is the one practiced in North Kerala. There are three stages in the mastery of the skill: flexibility build-up, armed combat, and hand combat. They showed me drills from the first two stages, and I was mesmerized indeed: the feeling was awesome and the claps incessant. In fact, I felt embarrassed on seeing such talented artists presenting their skills to a lone audience like me, who didn't even have the basic understanding of the art. But see my audacity! Even after watching their skills for almost an hour, I had the audacity to inquire if I could challenge them in the game, for which they graced me with a selfie reminding me that the martial artists can have a good sense of humor too.



Libido Drain or Love Jihad

Fort Kochi was also crowded by backpackers, who seem to stay there forever. In general, they were very reclusive: they would interact with you only on need basis. But thanks to my home stay manager, who was a handsome hunk and had managed to accumulate the best of the lot in his home stay, I did get a glimpse of their lives. Nevertheless, the manager was committed to a backpacker from France, with whom he was about to get married, and the trend seems to have caught up with all his friends. Another of his friend had already married a German girl and was about to migrate, and yet another was relentlessly wooing another German girl boarding in the same home stay.

I had a small chat with the girl, who seemed to be indifferent to commitment and was ready to mingle but not just with anybody, for she was pretty attractive and smart. The guy pursuing her was also pretty fit with a martial arts background. Incidentally, he was a Muslim, for which religion she seemed to be having hatred, but she did accompany him to an early morning Eid party. Is this Libido Drain or Love Jihad? Whatever, it seems to be lots of hard work: the girl was not interested in me at least, or as it seemed.

The Ferry Service

One of the high points of the place was the ferry service which linked Fort Kochi, Matancherry, Willingdon Island and Vypin Island to Ernakulam and traversed the whole stretch of Vembanad Lake sandwiched between the five places. A portion of this part of the lake is also a port, wherein through a narrow entry from Laccadive Sea, the ships comfortably dock in the backwaters at Willingdon Island. The Willingdon Island is therefore also the industrial hub of the city. The ferry service runs from Ernakulam to Vypin Island, to Matancherry, and to Fort Kochi. The routes are a bit confusing: the ferry going to Matancherry always halts at Fort Kochi but only sometimes at Willingdon Island; and the ferry going to Vypin Island halts at Fort Kochi on Sundays, Saturdays and holidays, but not always. Nevertheless, any of these ferry services covers most of the stretch of Vembanad Lake therein, which is also what is covered by the commercial luxury cruises operating therein.

The service was pretty nice, and I had almost become fan of it but for a Sunday when I waited for an hour in the queue to board the ferry from Fort Kochi to Ernakulam, alighting at Willingdon Island. This was because the sale of tickets would suddenly stop and start only five minutes before the departure of the next ferry. I have not seen a system more stupid. It seems the bureaucracy there was devoid of commonsense. Or is it that some vested interests of the commercial cruises were getting represented over the interest of the poor boarding the ferry? The poor, who stop complaining right at the birth itself when they find however much they suck, they don't find any milk in the mother's breast. Nevertheless, I made an email complaint to the authorities (including the CM) with a threat of going public. Nobody has responded; therefore, I am reproducing the contents of the email here-in-below:

This is to bring to your kind attention that a very arbitrary and irrational system is being followed by the Ferry Service at Ernakulam for the sale of tickets. The sale of tickets for a ferry starts just 5 minutes before the scheduled departure of the ferry, and the

sale is stopped arbitrarily even before the actual departure of the ferry. The sitting capacity of the ferry is 100 passengers, but the ferry generally runs to 2/3rd of its capacity only, that too when many people keep waiting in the queue at the ticket counter eager to board the ferry. This obviously means that the arbitrary sale of tickets for just five minutes before the schedule departure of the ferry keeps the ferry capacity underutilized.

Today, I stood in the queue for full 1 hr at Fort Cochin station to board a ferry towards Ernakulam. The queue would just not move because after every 15 minutes, the sale of ticket would stop and would start only five minutes before the departure of the next ferry (the frequency of the ferry service is 20 minutes). And when I finally boarded the ferry, I found the ferry left with only 65 passengers on board (I counted them). I have not understood the rationale behind this arbitrary system of ticket sales, which is leading to loss of revenue to the State as well as is causing harassment to the passengers.

I would suggest that the ferry tickets be sold uninterrupted throughout the day usable across all the ferries running on that day, and, in case the capacity is full, the people should be stopped from boarding the ferry at the boarding point only, not at the ticket counter. Better still the tickets may be sold inside the ferry itself, which would make the queuing at the ticket counter unnecessary.

Please take this as a notice. If I am not intimated in reply to this email of the remedial measures adopted in response to the issues raised by me hereinabove, or if I am not satisfied by the remedial measures adopted by you, the issues raised hereinabove shall then be raised in the media and/or judiciary.

Ernakulam

The best way to travel between Fort Kochi and Ernakulam is undoubtedly the ferry. Except for Sundays, Saturdays and holidays, the ferry queue is normal, and once in the ferry, the transfer from Fort Kochi to Ernakulam and vice versa

is pretty comfortable. The first thing you see alighting the ferry at Ernakulam is Marine Drive, which is a promenade running parallel to Vembanad Lake facing Ernakulam. You obviously start promenading and reach the sign board directing towards Ernakulam Market. You can either continue promenading or take a turn towards the market. I chose the second and reached the market, which was pretty cozy. I traversed most part of it including the fruit market: the fruit market is very well organized with shop numbers and specialized selling; the shops were owned by Muslims and Hindus both, which makes it clear there was no Hindu-Muslim tension.

The most talked about part of the market is Broadway. Unlike the Broadway in London, this was a narrow-way market with on-street selling competing with shops and kiosks. Other than lots of window shopping, I also did some real shopping at Broadway. The shopkeepers were reserved but helpful. Generally, they were not cheating customers. Indeed, there was scope for bargaining, but it seems not everybody was welcoming it, and those who weren't could also be nasty: at least I heard some nasty comments, which I ignored. There were lots of street food choices in and around the market, and also there were lots of spice shops selling banana chips, dry fruits, spices, jelly fruits, etc, with or without bargaining -- I became fan of banana chips, which are better tasting than potato chips and, of course, much healthier.

After shopping, I headed back to Marine Drive, which is a nice place to spend evenings after a tiring shopping spree. You just sit on one of the benches and watch the vast stretch of Vembanad Lake. And if you are lucky, you also pen a poem:

The pretty fish waved and smiled;
The Siberian crane asked me to fly;
The *Jal Kumbhi* just offered a ride.

The rain has started pouring;
The earth has started perfuming;
The wave just kissed before shying.

The birds are singing;
The mangroves are clapping;
The canoe is playing with me, eyes pyes.

Is this an illusion or a dream?
Or has my luck smiled?
This journey so beautiful has lost all its miles.

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Alleppey: Learn

The Context

After hearing about the luxury houseboats and for my abhorrence of the same, I had almost made up my mind to skip Alleppey – Can you believe it! But thanks to the snake boat races, which were happening everywhere in and around Alleppey during the Onam celebration week, I headed for Alleppey. Alleppey, Kumarakom, and Kollam are hubs of backwater cruising, but the backwaters don't start and end with luxury cruises. There is a whole different world out there extending from Kochi to Kollam. I had my share of luxury in a *Shikara* cruise in Vaikom backwaters near Kochi itself, which I have discussed elsewhere. Now my only motivation for Alleppey was discovery of a new different life waiting to be explored in backwaters.

Alleppey is the central hub of waterways opening up to the widest stretch of Vembanad Lake near Nehru Trophy Boat Race finishing point. I snuggled myself up in a comfortable home stay next to the finishing point for almost a week and explored the backwaters like a local (except that I had no knowledge of Malayalam). I think this is the only way to spend more than 2 days in backwaters: whatever your appetite for luxury, you just can't keep ordering people days-after-days, weeks-after-weeks, sitting in a luxury bedroom inside a houseboat, knowing well enough your houseboat is destroying the beautiful environment outside with the ugly snort of diesel.

Life in Backwaters

The life in the backwaters intersperses with that on the land, but indeed there are a few villages which have no land connection with the outside world. The backwaters are the canals and lakes created by the backflow of sea water into the rivers arriving from the Nilgiris for exit into the sea via lagoons created next to the sea by deposition of eroded soil. This flow of water, sweet n' salty, is

the lifeline of the people in the villages next to the backwaters. They fish and farm in the water and export the produce to the outside world through numerous boats of varying sizes extending from small toady boats to large snake boats, interestingly used traditionally for transportation of soldiers. Some row them leisurely with raw muscle power, yet others have installed automatic motors pushed by diesel. The government has also chipped in with their large size ferries connecting the main centers with the small island villages in the backwaters. I explored the backwaters in the government run ferries as well as a small country boat.



The ferry cruise connecting Alleppey to Kottayam is around a four hrs journey connecting dozens of villages *en route*. I boarded the ferry and tried looking as local-like as possible, but the long stay in Delhi has made me whiter, if not fairer, than most of them living in the villages, for which color the Keralites seem to be having a liking; so, each village would greet me with hand waves, which, after a while, my hands would respond in a sort of reflex action without any intervention of mind whatsoever. But, unfortunately, that also made me an alien, disconnecting me from the secrets of the backwaters lives. So, whatever I gathered is from my observation of the village life from a distance, which I did try to compensate later by taking a guided tour in a country boat but with moderate success only.

The villages located next to the backwaters were completely dependant upon ferry for travel. The houses were located next to the shore, and on the rear side were paddy fields. The ordinary schools and doctors were available in the villages itself, but most of the people owned small boats called toddy boats for emergency travel to the cities. There were also restaurants on the shores, which seemed to be catering to the leisure class. The people would wash laundry, utensils, themselves, in the backwaters, and would generally idle away time next to the waters.



Though the travel to and fro the local landmarks like churches/mosques/temples, neighborhood attractions, public services, etc, would happen in small country boats or bigger privately owned for-hire boats, the arrival of the government ferry, which would just be only a few times a day, would be an event of extraordinary importance, making people, young and old, sprinting to board the ferry. Most of the construction was ordinary and modest, but there were some lavishly build houses too, which on little inquiry were found to be owned by NRI returns from the Gulf.



For a tourist, all this would be an attraction, but, for locals, it might just be boring. How long can you remain attached to a same lifestyle? Yes, surely, the lifestyle was idyllic! Inspirational for writing! But what after the book completes? Change is necessary! Anyways, I don't think the tourists take the ferry too very often. So, the illusion remains intact in the houseboats.



The trip in the country boat was under the smart guidance of a local village man named James (name changed for privacy protection), shared with three young backpackers from Italy, Israel and Holland. After the trip in the big size ferry, the trip in the small country boat had its own character. The boat was like a small activist, who would just not attach himself to the glitz and glamour of the

big houseboats. Incidentally, James was earlier the captain of a large houseboat but had then started of his own with that small country boat and wouldn't change for anything (except may be a few billions). His determination became evident when we crossed over a large houseboat. Generally, the small boats would halt and wait for the big motorized houseboats to pass by, but James kept rowing. When we crossed over, it gave the feeling as if we were rowing back along with the big houseboat, but it was not so: we were rowing ahead with the grit and determination of James. This was a feeling similar to what we feel when we face big things in life. We get attracted to them so much so that we want to follow them even if they travel in the opposite direction. We tend to lose our direction enamored by the glamour of the big. But if the strength of the character is maintained, we remain focused, follow our destiny, and become important just because of the difference we offer, which very few dare do.

After traversing the big vast stretches of Meenapalli Lake and numerous narrow canals bordered by small and big villages, we reached Kuttamangalam, Kainakary, a hamlet of around 3,000 people, situated on both sides of a canal of about 30 ft width. The hamlet stretched about a km with two bridges at each corner. The people were extremely friendly. It seemed they were living co-operatively in a communist style living, but I also saw some empty plastic bottles demarcating a portion of the backwaters in front of a house, as if demarcating a private beach. Nevertheless, the village was pretty well developed with all facilities like roads, electricity, phone, etc, in spite of no land connection with the main cities. There were umpteen toddy boats stationed on either side of the canal readily available for across the canal transportation of goods and persons in a jiffy. The Onam celebrations had infused lots of loud dancing and singing on incomprehensible Malayali and comprehensible Bollywood numbers on either side of the canal. The celebrations had also created public nuisance, including garbage and dirt, which was an exception in Kerala.



The hamlet also had a high school with SNDP name. SNDP is a socio-religious organization, whose general secretary seems to have recently cozied up with Amit Shah of the BJP, but James, who was a subtle Left supporter, informed me that the people consider SNDP a non-political outfit and don't vote for the BJP under any circumstance – though I doubt it; in fact, I saw lots of BJP/RSS presence in Alleppey as well; I think, like in Bengal, the Communists are smug in Kerala too and would get a harsh surprise soon.

On the trip back, James was so tired that he even allowed us to row the boat for some time, or probably he mistook me for a teenager for the questions I had been asking him since morning – others were anyways more or less teenagers only. Nevertheless, I did row like a teenager for it was already afternoon and I was indeed hungry for the promised lunch at James'. And I was not disappointed: it was the best Keralan lunch I have had during my trip. With this lunch, my appetite for the backwaters was satisfied; don't know whether the write up above has satisfied your appetite; if not, meet me over a Lunch.

Kotayyam/Kumarakom

The small visit to Kotayyam was completely accidental. The return ferry from Kotayyam to Alleppey was not available for at least an hour; so, obviously I decided to visit the city, which, as usual, was neat and clean, and the people,

friendly and helpful. The main attraction in Kottayam district is Kumarakom backwaters. Of course, I had heard about it, but since my objective was not luxury, Kumarakom and Kottayam were not on my itinerary. Nevertheless, I decided to visit the bird sanctuary in Kumarakom knowing well enough I wouldn't spot a single bird in a September afternoon. But what I indeed spotted was the natural affection of the Keralites towards the tourists. They go out of way to help you and feel embarrassed if they even accidentally fail in their self-imposed obligation.

A small incident would make the above obvious. I took a local bus from Kottayam to Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary, which is some 7-8 km from the main city. In the bus, I was about to occupy a seat when an old man jumped onto it without realizing that I was interested in it too. But when he realized it, he kept feeling guilty. He stood up and offered me his seat. Obviously I refused. Finally, when I got the seat, he was delighted. Incidentally, the seat was next to him. He kept talking to me in Malayalam throughout the journey. I don't know Malayalam, he didn't know English, yet he was able to communicate that the government ferry service from Kumarakom to Muhamma was the best way to experience Vembanad Lake at Kumarakom, and I will have to thank him because it indeed is the best way to experience Vembanad Lake.

At the bird sanctuary, though there were no visible birds, there was lots of chirping, which was complementing the serene view of the lake. After a little walk, I seated myself on a tree branch at the end corner of the canal opening into the Vembanad Lake. The island of water hyacinths separated me from the lake and also secured me into the protective arms of a tree fitted tightly into the secure ground underneath. Who says water hyacinths don't serve any purpose! At least for me, they were my shield against my enthusiasm, which, but for them, would have taken me to the unknown world of Vembanad Lake, irrespective of the guard posted for security, who in any case was napping.



I have already cribbed about the houseboats, but here it is inevitable. The canal next to the bird sanctuary was the boarding and alighting point for the houseboats. The houseboats would turn at the corner where I was seated; the speed would be lowered; the engines would exude bad diesel smell while making obnoxious noise, which would frighten the chirping birds. I wonder how such a thing could ever be allowed. What worse, the Kerala Government has even categorized houseboats as Platinum, Gold and Silver, on the revenue they earn while scaring the chirping birds. This is Communism -- I wonder what would happen when it would be Neo-Liberalism, which it very soon would be under the competent advice of Gita Gopinath, the newly appointed advisor to the CM. These houseboats may look good from far, but from near they are nuisance, period.



Once again I was on a ferry; albeit this time on the advice of a grounded Keralite; and what an advice it was. The ferry traversed longitudinally through the widest stretch of Vembanad Lake from Kumarakom to Muhamma. There was nothing but water on the stretch. It seemed as if the water would not drown you if you were drawn towards it; rather it promised a new life, unknown yet to humanity. Just then I saw a toddy boat being roared by a sole soul in the vast expanse of Vembanad Lake. Incredible! The mere thought of riding a toddy boat on such a vast expanse of water would give me goose bumps, but he was doing it unbothered, as if he had already kissed the new life underneath the waters. Why and how else can one risk his life in such a manner!



The transfer from Muhamma to Alleppey happened in a KSRTC bus. In any other state, this would be a tiring, ordinary bus ride. But, in Kerala, everything is an experience: even a ride in KSRTC bus. The whole highway was lightened with shops selling everything from plastic furniture and granite to provisions and hardware. The habitation it seemed just didn't end. Except for

some traffic at the Muhamma bus station junction, there were no traffic jams anywhere. The road was pretty narrow, but everybody was maintaining the lane discipline. There were no dividers separating the traffic from the opposite direction, but no body was crisscrossing to overtake vehicles. Even at the Muhamma junction, the two policemen very swiftly released the traffic. Most interestingly, a commoner *suo-moto* started helping the policemen, which in Delhi would be madness, both for the police and the citizenry. There, it seemed normal and necessary to exist and survive.

Alleppey Beach

Alleppey Beach is hardly the part of Alleppey; atleast the auto drivers gave such an impression. It is just 4 km from the main town of Alleppey, but the auto drivers charged anything from 60 to 150 bucks. And if you would search for a pre-paid auto point at KSRTC, the enquiry, after scanning you from tip to toe, would advice you to board a KSRTC bus instead -- btw, the KSRTC bus drivers and conductors were all very welcoming towards the tourists; so, I didn't take it negatively, nor should you. This was the first sign of corruption I encountered in Kerala, which continued thereafter in Haripad/Payyipad, Munnar, Varkala, etc. Indeed, Kerala needs numerous pre-paid auto points, for the auto trade unions there; i.e., BMS, INTUC, AITUC, etc; were charging the Uber and Ola rates, albeit sans services even remotely comparable.

Nevertheless, Alleppey Beach was pretty beautiful. The beach towards the main entrance was crowded, but a small walk towards the north direction, the beach became cleaner and quieter, and it remained so for a very long stretch, where many beach resorts had also come up. Interestingly, there were display boards warning people from bathing and adventuring on that side of the beach. I wonder whether the beach resorts or the display boards appeared first. Anyways, the beach resorts had put up beach furniture in front of their properties, which were then occupied by dogs given the off season, and I must assure that the

Keralan dogs, like the Keralan men, are polite towards the tourists. They vacated one of the benches for me, which I occupied till I enjoyed a good afternoon nap.



By the time I woke up, the clouds enveloped the sky and the sea water complemented the clouds merging all into a single whole. The rains started pouring and lot many people came over to that side of the beach as well – Keralans are not naive after all; they knew exactly the veracity of those warning messages. Most of them were young college guys in some kind of a picnic mode. The Keralites seem to be having a good diet, may be because of beef. The young guys don't have paunches, are generally tall, and are pretty well developed too. Also there were many older women on the beach, who were ogling these guys, and it seemed as if it was normal and well-accepted.

I wonder which bureaucrat in Kerala came up with the idea of staring 14 sec or more as a criminal offence. Unless two people stare at each other, how would one know over another who stared whom? If a guy stares a girl, so would a girl stare the guy to reach a conclusion that she has been stared unless Google develops a special third eye for girls, which would capture the stares but won't stare the abominable guys; indeed a difficult call even for Google. Won't it be better to not have this staring offence at all? Let the old women stare young guys, and let the men stare irrespective of age, given the women never age -- anyways, the men won't stop, certainly not at a beach!

Payyipad Boat Race

There are lots of snake boat races in Kerala, especially during the Onam festival celebrations. The biggest of them all, Nehru Trophy, was already over, but there were many challengers for the second spot: Payyipad, Aranmula, Moolam, etc. I chose Payyipad for no specific reason. This race is patronized by the Congress' politicians, and it did turn pretty funny by the end of it. Let me give the spoilers right away.

The participating captains would fight over lane selection, and the forthwith commentator would also apprise the audience of it. The audience, so patient, would wait for an hour for the captains to settle the dispute. As a compromise, all of them would race in the single central lane, and since they would ride so close to each other, nobody would win or lose but one would be announced winner nevertheless. The winner would obviously do a victory parade, in which the losing team's supporters would throw pop corns, water, ice cream, bottles, shoes, sticks, chairs, banners, furniture, and almost everything else available to them at their disposal in the VIP enclosure.

Nevertheless, the event was not so poorly organized even. There were three enclosures for seating the audience, ticketed at Rs 150/-, Rs 250/- and Rs 500/-. I chose the Rs 250/- enclosure, and thankfully so given what would eventually happen in the VIP enclosure ticketed at Rs 500/-. The Rs 150/- enclosure was occupied mostly by the police personnel. Or, were they given free passes for crowd control? Whatever, they became part of the crowd, more or less, and didn't do anything to control the crowd. And thankfully so, else the event wouldn't have ended so entertainingly.

But the enclosures were superfluous. The best vantage points were available on tree branches, canal embankments, bridge pillars, and anywhere and everywhere in the canal generally but only if you were willing to swim with or without clothes. I did take a plunge, left my comfortable seat, and seated myself

on the canal embankment in front of the enclosure, which did give me a very advantageous vantage point, albeit with a constant threat of being dropped into the canal by an ever enthusiastic crowd. Anyways, in the enclosure, my seat was next to a drunken old man, who would soon tear off all his clothes and jump into the canal.



BTW, there was a family of three foreigners too in the audience (no, not Italians), who were also seated in the same enclosure and were garnering lots of eyeballs. The mother was an effusive lady, who was looking younger than her age, and the Kerelan guys were waving at her continuously from the many boats they were riding in the canal before the race, and she also seemed to be enjoying the attention. I don't know what happened to her by the end of the race. I only hope she didn't enter the VIP enclosure for security.



The real race was preceded by a random boat parade, which included participants from Baba Ramdev's Patanjali Centre, Nuns from the local church, some Muslim clerics, professional dancers, a circus troupe, *et al.* However, the real participants were very well organized, who presented a fantastic drill near the finishing line just before starting the races, and that's the only time I felt happy on spending money to watch the race because then the canal was cleared of all boats and swimmers and the drill was the only distraction in the water, which was best visible to the privileged ticket holders.

The races continued for almost two hours with continuous commentary in Malayalam by an energetic speaker. I made friends with two Malayalam speaking locals, who religiously updated me with the happenings. However, even they were confused. I ended up watching at least five final races till I found the finalists were actually fighting over lane selection as discussed above. The others were actually self-sponsored races of the losers, who were trying to win, if nothing else, the appreciation of the audience.

Eventually, when the final race did happen, it was electric. There was not a single soul seated on the seats. People were clapping, singing, and shouting continuously, and those high on adrenalin were jumping into the water with or without clothes. This was an event which can't be described but can only be experienced. I think this boat race would be better than the more sophisticated

Nehru Trophy Race because of the liberty it gave to the audience to become the participants. No wonder, when the stakes were so high, some people would get offended and throw pop corns, water, ice cream, bottles, shoes, sticks, chairs, banners, furniture, etc, into the victory parade. I don't think this electric an environment could have ended in any other manner. All in the game!

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Varkala: Relax

Munnar to Varkala



Transfer from Munnar to Varkala was not easy. As I had missed my bus in Munnar, I was already late. In addition to that, I didn't board the direct bus to Ernakulam. The bus dropped me at Aluva, from where I was advised to board a train to Ernakulam, some 30 minutes away in the train journey. After a wait of an hour, I did board a train but in the general compartment. There are two railway junctions in Ernakulam: North and South. I didn't know that the trains halting at Ernakulam North don't halt at Ernakulam South and vice versa. Ernakulam North arrived at the promised moment, and I did alight, but just then a fellow traveler assured me the train would halt at Ernakulam South too. In fact, he was himself alighting there. He looked like a local; so, I didn't double confirm it. Only later I realized he was himself traveling to the city for the first time in a group comprising 30 people from Jharkhand. BTW, just for information, this was his fourth train in his single journey from Jharkhand to Ernakulam. Anyways, the Ernakulam South never arrived, and I reached Kottayam instead at 01.30 AM, and I had a train to board from Ernakulam South at 5 AM. In addition to that, I was traveling ticket less in a general compartment. Of course, I duped the ticket checker, who was diligently active in service even at the wee

hours of the morning, got a return ticket to Ernakulam North, and somehow reached Ernakulam South on time to board the train to Varkala. It was a sleepless night, but it would have been so in any case. However, I will have to admit that even the general compartments in those trains were pretty clean and comfortable.

Putting Up in Varkala

I think the little trouble in the train journey was to prepare me for a very comfortable stay at Varkala. Talking of stay at Varkala, let me inform you it is very important to choose your abode in Varkala with a great taste. There are four choices: North Cliff, beyond North Cliff, South Cliff, and Varkala Beach. North Cliff is the hub of activities, and most people want to put up there. I also put myself up in a sea facing room in a hotel at North Cliff, which was a good option. However, better it is to put yourself up in a home stay or a hotel at South Cliff, most of whom have stairs leading to the secluded parts of the beach, which they don't mind calling their own private beaches, where you can swim and bath sans stares. There are also lots of resorts on the stretch extending from North Cliff to Edava/Kappil beach, which offer a cozy stay in the serene natural beauty, albeit sans beaches. However, I will advise you not to put up at the Varkala Beach *per se*. It is a crowded place with less comfort and privacy, which you wouldn't expect from a beach life, even if it is just for a day or two.

Varkala was the last stage of my trip, and I chose it to wind down and write. I am not a swimmer; I am not colored; I don't wear bikinis; I don't ogle girls; and I don't play frisbee with dogs; so, I hardly had any charm for the beach *per se*. I just wanted to stare into the unending landscapes of water, which I could do from my hotel room itself. So, I didn't do much in Varkala except for taking a long morning walk from North Cliff to Kappil Beach, spending an evening in the South Cliff, and taking a *Shirodhara* massage at North Cliff. But I

did enjoy my comfortable stay at Varkala observing, thinking, and writing. A lot of what has gone into this book was indeed written at Varkala.



Ayurveda: *Shirodhara* Massage

Ayurveda is omnipresent in Varkala. I don't have many positive opinions about Yoga. However, I have been doing *Jalneti* to manage my sinus. I don't know whether it has helped me or not, but it does give a good feeling for some time, especially in a polluted city like Delhi. In Varkala, the nature care options are many. Almost every second resort has a resident doctor-cum-manager, who would offer you medical consultation followed by a tailor made Ayurvedic treatment program comprising series of Yoga massages and exercises. I chose to try *Shirodhara* massage, in which lukewarm herbal oil with coconut oil base is poured on forehead for nearly 40 minutes. As per the doctor there, the *Shirodhara* massage should be preceded and followed by a head massage, and he decided to offer it free to me. So, the whole program lasted for an hour. Was it any good? Well...this program offers to cure you of your insomnia by reducing stress, releasing headache, migraine, etc. I don't have any chronic headache problem, but I do wake up several times at night. Of course, I am not naive enough to expect cure of my sleep problems (if any) in a single exercise. Before starting the exercise, the advice I got from the doctor was to not to expect much,

to enjoy the moment, and to try not to think too much about it. I don't do meditation, so it is not possible for me not to think. I asked him if it would be alright to fall asleep. He said it would be the best. Unless I am with a partner, I fall asleep thinking something or the other: fantasies, court proceedings, social issues, nature, and chores in the decreasing order of preference. My obvious choice there was fantasies. Ever since I had come to Kerala, I had not found a single girl arousing amorous interest. Interestingly, during the exercise, I dreamt of an unknown Keralan face, of whose I was not interested in the face of course. The message of the exercise: Not only hills, backwaters, and beaches but also Keralan girls are sexy; point well taken.

Morning Walk: North Cliff to Edava/Kappil Beach



It seems North Cliff to Edava/Kappil Beach is a completely unexplored area. There was an unstructured walkway right from the cliff to the beach, but, of course, it was not well planned. There were lots of private beach resorts on the way, who had obviously constructed promenades on the shore lines in front of their properties. These promenades linked to each other forming a continuous pathway. Wherever there were no resorts, there were *kuccha* pathways used by the villagers. The walk in the morning was an immense pleasure. There was so much of natural beauty in and around the pathway that a few km walk turned

into a never ending dreamwalk taken leisurely in sync with the pace of the clouds on the horizon. The modest houses of the commoners gave competition to the big resorts of the rich, for the nature wouldn't discriminate between the rich and the poor. Fortunately, the political society of the place had still not allowed the resorts to acquire the lives of the villagers; therefore, the fishermen would carry out their activities unperturbed next to the resorts, and the guests would, for a change, watch and learn.



Edava/Kappil Beach at the end of the pathway was serene and beautiful. There was not a sign of humanity on the stretch except for some fishermen activities at the start of the stretch. I almost ran naked on the beach but for the small fishes who had come on the shore in lecherous interest, but I was in no mood to entertain them. I diligently picked them up, caressed them, and gently flung them back into the water lest they should die in amour.

There was also a beautiful backwater lake running parallel to the beach, which had been exploited by the entrepreneurs to build resorts alongside the lake. But the resorts were mostly unoccupied because of the off season. There were also stone embankments alongside the sea periodically halting the walk along the beach, but these halts also gave the opportunity to sit, relax, watch the vast expanse of water, and contemplate, while getting drenched in the waves. Luckily, the clouds on the horizon were also matching their pace with that of

mine. Seeing me tired, they also halted and poured a bit before starting their journey again.

How versatile the nature can be! She can use the same clouds to express joy, sadness, anger and love. She can use the same wind for navigation, destruction, breeze and smoke. She can use the same Sun for light, eclipse, energy and blaze. It all depends upon the relationship you want to enjoy with her. You can fall in love with her and enjoy her protection, or you can destroy her with your unhindered and audacious adventures, which eventually destroys you. Unfortunately, this relationship is not one-to-one; it was only my luck that I was alone there and got the special attention of the clouds. At all other times, how nature loves one is the result of the cumulative love of all to her and the humans still have a lot to learn about love.

After a walk of around 3 km, I reached the end of the beach, where I found some dogs. I did get frightened for I was in clear minority amongst the Varkala dogs, who have been made notorious by media for attacking humans. But, thankfully, they were busy in some kind of foreplay, and I never pose any threat to any kind of sexual activity unless it's rape. So, I moved on and crossed the beach through a stone embankment separating the sea from a small lake and leading towards a motorable road, and the next I saw "Real Yoga Center: Lake N' Sea" having the lake on the back and the sea on the front, but I think the dogs were having more fun over there. No, I don't think Varkala dogs pose any threat to humanity.





If a regular pathway were to be built between North Cliff and the end of Edava/Kappil Beach, it would become the most visited promenade. But, of course, it would affect the rural set up amongst other things. I was able to explore this beauty of nature mainly because I like exploring things, and probably the most interesting things are reserved for the explorers only.

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Epilogue

Kerala is a land of pleasures. There is not just one thing which engages your faculties. There are the hills, the backwaters, the wildlife, the religion, the beaches, the art, the history, the habitations...and the list continues. I started my trip from Kochi, which indeed is the best gateway to the intriguing and magnificent Kerala for the first time visitors, but those who have experienced Kerala will have their favorites. Some may want to relax at beaches forever, others may want to experience art and history in the cities, yet others may want to row in the backwaters. Some may want to ride their bikes on the hills, others may want to explore wildlife, yet others may want to pilgrimage. I found my solace in the hills: indeed Munnar has emerged as my favorite; so, I have presented her the first in this book. She was the favorite, but the backwaters, the beaches, the art, and the history were not far behind. I wanted to explore wildlife but couldn't, and that has left a void. I have no interest in religion, but who can remain disengaged from "God" in "God's own Country"; so, I did encounter him time-to-time in and around churches, temples, mosques, and wherever else, but I certainly didn't make any special efforts to engage with him. But for the knowledge of Malayalam, I would have explored the habitations. But given the kind of love the people exuded in Kerala, the attraction was overwhelming. For now, they remain unexplored, but who knows what may happen tomorrow.

I had to return. There was no option otherwise. Could have it been any different? Why can't I become a traveler forever? Why can't I grow a money tree, which would fund all my travel expenses? Or can I try a career in travel? Why do I have to be in Delhi to attend courts? Why can't there be mobile courts, who would be global travelers too? Why can't everybody be just a traveler? Why do we need permanent addresses?

I don't know the answers to the above questions, but I am adamant to make my world beautiful, which obviously can't happen if I remain stuck in Delhi. Of course, I will travel soon, and when I do that, I will write some more.

Will you read that too? You will! Right! For now, please rate/review this book: it gives lots of motivation. Thanks for your time! Hope to catch up soon!

(Do checkout my book: [Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#))

Appendix A: Info Kochi

Country: India

State: Kerala

District: Ernakulam

Area: 742 Square km

Elevation: 0m

Population: 3,117,990 (2012)

Languages: Malayalam, English

Places of Interest: Marine Drive, Chinese Finishing Net, Mattanchery Palace, Sanata Cruz Basilica, Kerala History Museum, Broadway, Backwaters, Bolgatty Island, Vypin Island, Willingdon Island, etc.

Eating Places: Dal Roti, Kashi Art Café, Fusion Bay, Malabar Junction, Fort House, Dhe Puttu, Pepper House, Oceanos, Teapot Café, etc.



Map of Kochi and Nearby Areas (Source: Google Maps)

Appendix B: Info Alleppey

Country: India

State: Kerala

District: Allappuzha/Alleppey

Area: 46.18 Square km

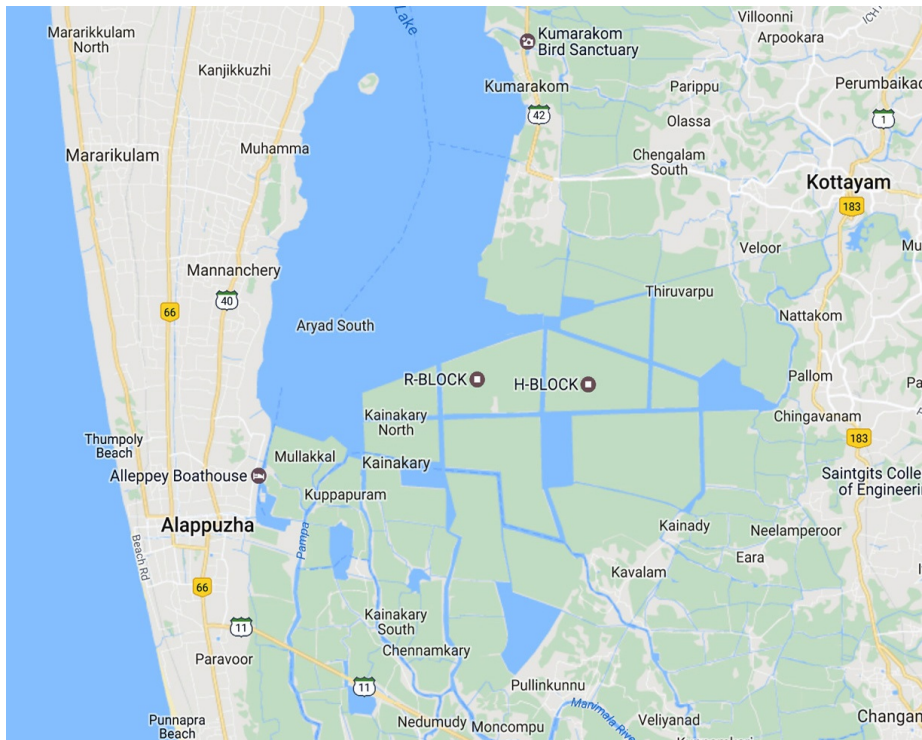
Elevation: 11m

Population: 174,164 (2011)

Languages: Malayalam, English

Places of Interest: Vembanad Lake, Alleppey Beach, Backwaters, Boat Races, Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary, Krishnapuram Palace, Kuttanad, etc.

Eating Places: Kream Korner, Halai's, Makkani, Dreamers, Thaff, Indian Coffee House, Mushroom, etc.



Map of Alleppey and Nearby Areas (Source: Google Maps)

Appendix C: Info Munnar

Country: India

State: Kerala

District: Idduki

Area: 557 Square km

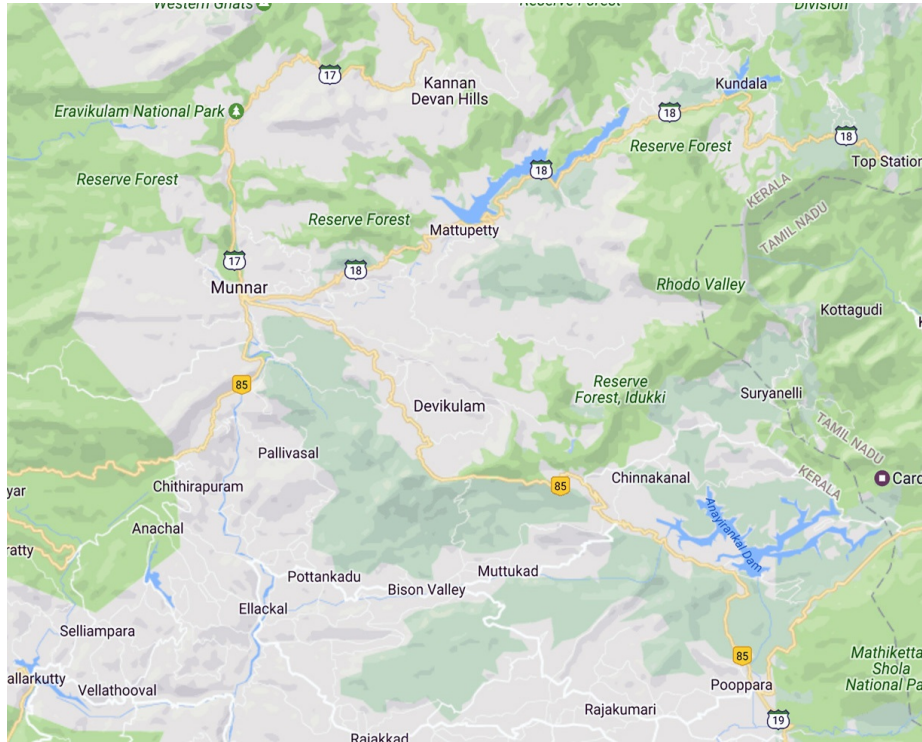
Elevation: 1700m

Population: 68,205

Languages: Malayalam, English

Places of Interest: Eravikulam National Park, View Points, Water Falls, Dams & Lakes, Tea Museums, Tea Gardens, Blossom Park, Rose Garden, Indo-Swiss Dairy Farm, Villages, etc.

Eating Places: Rapsy, Saravana Bhavan, Surya Soma, Silver Tips, S N Restaurant, Hazrath Hotel, Gurubhavan Hotel, etc.



Map of Munnar and Nearby Areas (Source: Google Maps)

Appendix D: Info Varkala

Country: India

State: Kerala

District: Trivandrum

Area: 15.42 Square km

Elevation: 190m

Population: 40,048 (2011)

Languages: Malayalam, English

Places of Interest: North Cliff, South Cliff, Varkala Beach, Kappil Beach, Janaradanaswamy Temple, Ponnumthuruthu, Fish Aquarium, etc.

Eating Places: Everest German Bakery, Trattorias, Palm Tree Heritage, Gods Own Country, Darjeeling Café, Little Tibet, InDa, etc.



Map of Varkala and Nearby Areas (Source: Google Maps)

Appendix E: Trip Timeline

3rd September, 2016: Boarded the train, Kerala Express, at Delhi.

5th September, 2016: Reached Ernakulam; traveled to Fort Kochi and put up therein.

12th September, 2016: Traveled from Fort Kochi to Alleppey via Ernakulam and put up in Alleppey

17th September, 2016: Traveled from Alleppey to Fort Kochi via Ernakulam and put up in Fort Kochi.

18th September, 2016: Traveled from Fort Kochi to Munnar via Ernakulam and put up in Suryanelli near Munnar.

21st September, 2016: Traveled from Munnar to Thekkady and put up therein.

23rd September, 2016: Traveled from Thekkady to Munnar and then to Varkala via Ernakulam.

24th September 2016: Reached Varkala and put up therein

28th September, 2016: Traveled from Varkala to Trivandrum and boarded the train, Nizammudin Express, thereat.

30th September, 2016: Reached Delhi.

Other Titles by the Author

[Annapurna Circuit Trek: Fairy Tale of Love with Nature](#)

[Nine Poems Series](#)

[Anti-National Humanist](#)

[Claims on Privacy: An Essay](#)

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